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SUBJECT: IRAQI CONSTITUTION--GETTING THE WORD OUT

REF: STATE 158420

1. (SBU) Post has shared the Iraqi constitution information contained in reftel with Ministry of Foreign Affairs, think-tank, and media contacts. In discussions with government contacts embassy officers stressed the importance of establishing a positive political environment for the constitutional process, and urged the Dutch to find ways to contribute to the process. We specifically asked our interlocutors to make positive public statements about the process. Media reaction to the draft constitution has been somewhat negative, with most commentators questioning what had been achieved in light of Sunni objections and the prospects that some saw for civil war.

Government Outreach

2. (SBU) Post shared the information with Ministry of Foreign Affairs contacts on several levels, including:

- The Charge passed the papers to Marnix Krop, Director General for European Cooperation, prior to the September 1-2 Gymnich meeting.

- The Charge also discussed the Iraqi Constitution with former Dutch Foreign Minister Max van der Stoep, who has been working quietly with Iraqi groups (with the support of the Dutch MFA) to resolve a number of issues related to the constitution.

- POLCOUNS and POLOFF shared the points/fact sheets in person and discussed with senior or working-level interlocutors in MFA's Department of Political Affairs, the North America Desk, the Department of Security Affairs and the Department of Near East and North African Affairs

Outreach to Public Opinion Makers

3. (U) The Public Affairs section shared the fact sheet and Secretary Rice's statement with ten newspapers and magazines

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across the political spectrum, as well as one TV outlet. PAS also contacted an influential group of international affairs opinion makers and academics at the Clingendael Institute, a prominent think tank.

Media Reaction

4. (U) "Iraqi Parties Have to Compromise; That is the Right of the Citizens"
Left-of-Center "Trouw" states in its editorial (8/27):
"President Bush called the hard efforts to write a Constitution for Iraq a positive thing, but every true democrat should be worried by the political developments in Baghdad. Does it really matter if Iraq does not have a Constitution? When last week's deadline passed, new elections should have been called for - as had been laid down in the interim Constitution. This did not happen. Secondly, it is worrying that a majority is threatening to impose its will on a minority. A democracy should respect the rights of minorities. . In these circumstances, the negotiators, Sunnis as well as others, are also to blame for not trying their best to achieve an acceptable compromise. It is about time that the citizens of the country get what they have a right to: clean water, electricity and health care."

"Sunnis not Behind the Constitution."
Left-of-Center Trouw's (8/29) foreign editors report: "Since the Sunnis resist the Constitution, there is a big chance that it will not be accepted by the population in the October referendum. . The Sunni 'no' is a great disappointment to the U.S. government. Still, President Bush thinks the document is an 'inspiration to the supporters of democracy.'"

"Iraqi Constitution not a Feast but a Divisive Element"
Influential independent "NRC Handelsblad" carries a front-page analysis by editor Carolien Roelants (8/29): "The constitutional process in Iraq is threatening to promote the

Sunni rebellion into a civil war. The proposals for a federal state are the product of a Shiite-Kurdish agreement. The Americans realize that the Sunnis will continue their violent opposition ... and put great pressure on all parties to reign themselves in." Still, George Bush called it: "The most progressive Constitution in the Islamic world."

"Iraq Back to Where it Started"

Influential independent "NRC Handelsblad" in its editorial (8/29): "The prospect of a viable Iraqi democracy and, with that, of an honorable withdrawal of American and British troops is further off than ever. . America thinks about withdrawing troops . even though there is no real reason for that, because there is no progress at all. . The situation is, in fact, more serious than during the Vietnam War, because a civil war threatens in an area that is of world importance for its oil resources. The course of the fighting in Iraq is also used as a motive for terrorist actions in the West.... Reason for President Bush to drop his rosy, unilateral ideas about the world order. America needs the help of international organizations and allies to prevent worse."

"Divided Iraq"

Influential liberal "De Volkskrant" has this editorial (8/30): "The responsible parliamentary commission has not succeeded in writing a draft Constitution acceptable to all parties. . This is bad news for Iraq - and for the Bush government that, behind the screens, put great pressure on the parties to reach agreement. It is mainly the crisis in the Sunni community that blocked a compromise. . Several Sunni leaders have by now been killed for their willingness to cooperate. . If the draft text had been accepted, the politicians would have shown that the building of a democratic order does not let itself be derailed by violence. . In the mean time, the level of suspicion in the country has further increased, which plays into the hands of the Jihadists."

"Worse than Vietnam"

Influential independent "NRC Handelsblad" op-ed by columnist H.J.A. Hofland (8/31): "The milestone of the new Constitution may also become the blueprint for a civil war. The more official optimism, the more this is hit by inflation. . There were many warnings by big allies when the war in Iraq was being prepared. President Bush and his staff were inaccessible. The philosophers of the American government concluded that 'old Europe' consisted mainly of cowards. Still, the American superpower kept isolating itself from the rest of the world" through, for instance, ".Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, fighting AIDS in Africa through sexual abstinence, cancelling the Kyoto Protocol, and reforming the UN . Large parts of Europe understand the seriousness of Iraq. A civil war which might draw in Syrai, Iran and Saudi Arabia, is a nightmare. The unanswered question remains how the U.S. President can be reached, can be made receptive to other solutions. Bush's words 'We will prevail' are like a gramophone record stuck in one groove. As things stand now, only the Americans themselves can change their government's mind. That is the big similarity with the war in Vietnam." BLAKEMAN